

7 things you should know about...

Flip Camcorders

Scenario

Jamie is completing his junior year by applying for one of five travel grants in Global Resource Management. Along with the required essay, he submits a video montage he created using a Flip camera—a small digital camcorder. In his essay, Jamie explains that he intends to chart the food system in a village in Kenya and hopes to supplement his field notes with video footage collected on the Flip camera. The committee likes the idea of video field notes well enough not only to select his application for one of the grants but also to provide a Flip to each grant winner. Before he leaves for Kenya, Jamie contacts each of the other four grant winners and asks them to capture certain images in the food cycle in each of their destinations in rural communities of Africa and South America. He sets up a website for them to share video information.

While the students are on their respective trips, collecting information for their various projects, they upload video clips to the site, and Jamie begins editing and organizing them. In their video field notes, the students document segments of the food cycle that include techniques for seed-saving and irrigation. As they record people going about their everyday work, the students find that their subjects are eager to demonstrate techniques and to view the techniques captured on video from the other villages. Back on his home campus, Jamie's peers follow along by viewing the footage and compare techniques and strategies for food production and preparation. One of the other students records the unsuccessful efforts of a village to repair a storm-damaged well without proper tools or raw materials. Jamie suggests she upload it to a charity site where donors can select village projects to fund. The video demonstrates the village's need in a manner that crosses language barriers.

What is it?

Flip video devices, made by Pure Digital Technologies, are small, inexpensive, digital camcorders that slip easily into a shirt pocket or small purse. In a time when makers of technology tools and applications continually add features, causing some to decry what they see as “technology for technology’s sake,” Flip camcorders buck this trend in favor of a device that does one thing and does it well, with little fuss. The camcorders are simple, with a lens and microphone on the front and a video screen and a few buttons on the back. These devices are entirely automatic, without the need—or the option—to change manual settings. A spring-loaded USB plug on the device allows it to attach directly to a computer for file transfers. Built-in software enables video transfer for processing, storage, or sharing on sites like YouTube and Facebook. For about the price of a low-end digital camera, the Flip produces up to an hour of video that is surprisingly good for the price and more than adequate for web viewing.

Who’s doing it?

Since its introduction, the Flip has quickly become extremely popular, reportedly capturing 13 percent of the camcorder market in its first year. This past spring, the Department of Communications at the University of Washington used the Flip in a student video expedition and documentary examining progress made in rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. This fall, Duke University is providing Flip camcorders to faculty and students interested in exploring the technology and investigating the approaches to teaching and learning that it enables. Unigo.com, an online guide to North American colleges and universities, provides Flip devices to students, who capture video on the fly and deliver it to the site promptly. Because the Flip is inexpensive enough to be taken into situations where it could be damaged or lost, it is a natural fit for everyone from bloggers documenting road trips to citizen journalists recording breaking news for Web presentation.

How does it work?

Flip camcorders are the quintessential point-and-shoot devices. Recording video is as simple as aiming the lens and microphone toward a subject and pressing the record button. Because every function is automatic, there are no settings—just controls for play, delete, and zoom. Video is captured on a flash drive, and the unit has a 1.5-inch LCD screen to watch playback of the video. To download video, users simply fold out the USB arm,

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plug the camcorder directly into a high-speed USB port on any PC or Mac, and double-click to open the built-in software, which offers basic video editing. Users can then e-mail video or upload it to social networking or video-sharing sites. For advanced functionality, users can import the files into standard video-editing software. Because the device includes a USB plug, there are no cables to carry, and the built-in software means that videos can be uploaded for video sharing from anywhere—a library, a café, or a friend's house—without having to install software. Alternatively, a user could plug the Flip directly into a USB-enabled TV to view the video, though the low resolution is not optimal for large-format presentation.

Why is it significant?

A growing component of digital literacy is the notion of “video literacy,” in terms of both consuming and creating video. Where this tiny camcorder fulfills its promise of easy use, it puts digital filmmaking into the hands of ordinary people wanting to tell their everyday stories, without worrying about the price and complexity of conventional camcorders. Educators who employ a learning-by-doing approach have found the Flip to be simple and inexpensive enough for K–12 students to record interviews and capture video footage for community history projects and documentaries. For college and university faculty, these devices are excellent tools for capturing field-based video or conducting quick interviews of subject-matter experts.

Those struggling to provide classroom technology on limited budgets may find an inexpensive digital camcorder offers more educational impact per dollar than a new laptop. A Flip could be used to record simple lab procedures for training purposes, such as clinical tasks for nursing or microbiology. The Flip functions well in low light, and students recording field trips, campus life, and peer interviews find the Flip's low profile doesn't act as a barrier between interviewer and interviewee. The Flip allows users to create video stories and essays, document procedures, interview experts, and record other activities, even as the technology itself becomes invisible.

What are the downsides?

Any time a technology simplifies a previously complex task, a new set of expectations and best practices must be developed. Just as early desktop publishing software resulted in documents with a jumble of fonts, colors, and imbedded images, the low bar for entry into Flip filmmaking results in some rather shaky video with distracting sound and uneven editing. And, although the simplicity of having built-in memory eliminates concerns about misplacing a memory card or which kind is the right replacement, the inability to change out the memory card does limit the Flip's flexibility.

The ease of creating video also raises issues of intellectual property and privacy that need to be resolved, particularly when filming people who might not know they are being filmed or might not want their faces posted publicly. A Flip might hitchhike, for example, as an unwelcome guest on a field trip to a food facility,

a television studio, or a construction site, and students need to understand the possible repercussions of publicly posting footage they take. Even when students are responding to specific assignments, they need guidance in understanding what to capture and how they should fit their video into a proper academic or classroom context.

Where is it going?

These diminutive camcorders have caught the popular imagination, and the success of similar devices like the Vado by Creative and the RCA Small Wonder suggests a robust market. Their simplicity and low cost may prove a boon for digital literacy in general, enabling projects in community service, history, local commerce, and the arts. Their affordability might lead to requirements that students purchase them along with other standard course resources. A new Flip model offers high-definition video capability, as do some of its competitors, and the ability to easily capture HD footage will greatly expand the range of potential uses of that video.

Expanded access to video-capture tools adds to the proliferation of digital content, which places a growing burden on users trying to sort through and manage vast amounts of material, and the video format may require new cataloging, filtering, search, and evaluative tools. Consider, for example, the complications of identifying student plagiarism on assignments delivered in video rather than text.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The Flip's simplicity in creating and uploading video makes it an excellent choice for educational situations—for instruction and assessment—in which mastery of a skill or a concept can best be demonstrated through video, including such fields as chemistry, nursing, dance, or visual arts. A video showing the lost-wax method of casting metal, for example, offers more impact in video than a text-based explanation. Distance education, in particular, might benefit from the ability to share video between faculty and students who otherwise have no opportunity for face-to-face interaction. To the extent that media including video become accepted formats for academic work, devices like the Flip will open other avenues for student assignments. This will draw attention to the importance of developing new rubrics for effective evaluation of multimedia and will raise questions of fair use and appropriate attribution. Finally, students who use the Flip in academic exercises that begin as lifeblogs or citizen journalism may find that their learning opportunities have expanded beyond the classroom and into the wider community.